

Model Consumers? Clues to Ceramic Acquisition at Slave Quarter Sites in the Greater Chesapeake

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1. Introduction

To what extent did enslaved households on elite plantations in the Greater Chesapeake participate in the consumer revolution during the last half of the eighteenth century?

Although primary sources, such as store accounts and planters' journals, have contributed to our growing understanding of slaves as active participants in the market economy (Heath 1997), they do not always survive to aid our understanding of the acquisition strategies employed by enslaved individuals. Here we demonstrate that a Ceramic Index, which provides a measure of vessel abundance that is sensitive to rates of ceramic discard, is one way to gauge Chesapeake slaves' participation in the market economy.

Using ceramic data from seven slave quarter sites, we use Estimated Vessel Equivalents to calculate the index values of vessel forms that rose in popularity during the eighteenth century. We suggest that high index values for forms used for entertaining and costly social rituals, such as tea drinking, may pinpoint households that actively sought goods with social cachet. We then discuss the differences in these calculated discard rates and what they tell us about consumption at these slave sites.

2. The Ceramic Index: Measuring Consumption through Discard Rates

A Ceramic Index provides a measure of vessel abundance that is sensitive to variation in discard rates and that is comparable between sites.

Ceramic Indices can be calculated using a variety of abundance measures, such as sherd counts, sherd weights, and estimated vessel equivalents.

The higher the index value, the higher the ceramic discard rate. For example, the higher the Teaware Index, the more teawares were being discarded.

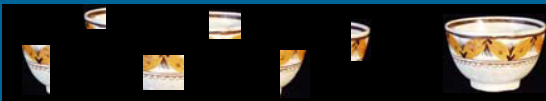
We assume that the discard rates of hollow tablewares, such as bowls and mugs, remain relatively steady throughout the late-18th century. This gives us a useful constant with which to compare discard rates of other vessel forms.



For this study we used Estimated Vessel Equivalents.

$$\text{Ceramic Index} = \frac{(\text{Teaware EVE})^*}{(\text{Hollow Tableware EVE}) + (\text{Teaware EVE})^*}$$

*Insert your favorite vessel form EVE here!



3. Estimated Vessel Equivalents are easy and fun!

The Estimated Vessel Equivalent method:

- Provides an estimate of vessel abundance that is not affected by rates of decoration or degrees of brokenness
- Produces data that are statistically comparable both within and between sites.
- Measures a sherd as a proportion of a whole vessel. If one were to (theoretically) assign each sherd in an assemblage a score, the sum of the scores would measure vessel abundance (Orton et al. 1993).
- Requires rim or base sherds that are easily identifiable to a vessel type. For this analysis we used rim sherds.

$$\text{EVE} = \frac{\sum (\text{Rim Lengths for a given vessel form})}{\text{Average Rim Diameter for a given vessel form}}$$

We calculated EVEs for five vessel form categories found at all seven sites.

Sites	Chamberpot	Flat Tableware	Hollow Tableware	Teaware	Utilitarian
Bldg o	0.65	11.50	3.42	10.32	1.72
Bldg l	0.24	6.15	1.49	3.20	0.45
Bldg s	0.93	29.24	6.48	20.76	3.22
Bldg r	0.19	5.58	1.50	7.01	0.50
ST116		0.27	0.12	0.25	0.17
House for Families		1.63	1.01	1.74	0.77
Site 8	0.04	0.30	0.14	0.32	1.44

An Example: Building o has 11.5 flat tableware equivalents and 10.32 teaware equivalents.

4. The Sites



House for Families, Mount Vernon: Located on George Washington's plantation, this slave quarter site was occupied circa 1760-1792. It was once a large barracks-style communal residence that housed between 40 and 50 enslaved persons. Due to modern disturbances, the only archaeological remains of House for Families is an approximately 6 by 6 foot, brick-lined cellar.

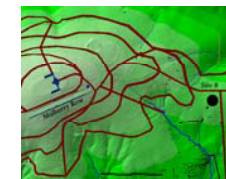


The Greater Chesapeake Region, Virginia



ST116, Stratford Hall Plantation:

Measuring around 8 by 8 feet, this earth-fast quarter was probably home to one enslaved household. It has a mean ceramic date of 1781 and the site has been plowed for much of the past 100 years.



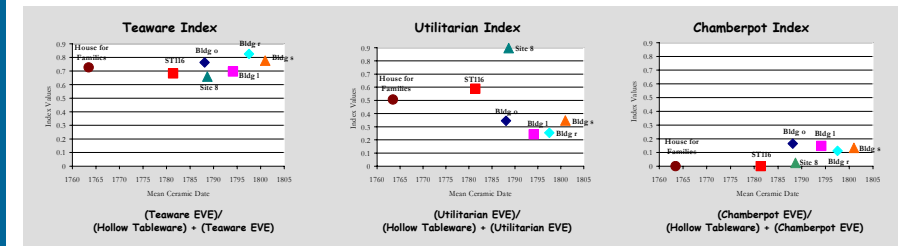
Site 8, Monticello: Site 8 is a home farm quarter that dates from the late 18th century. Two subfloor pits found during the 2001 field season are the only architectural remains of the physical structure. Site 8 is located one half mile from the Monticello Mansion and quarters along Mulberry Row.



Subfloor pits at Site 8.

Buildings o, l, r and s, Monticello: These slave quarters are located on Mulberry Row, a concentrated area of domestic and industrial activity. Archaeological excavations support Jefferson's descriptions of buildings o, r, and s as quarters for enslaved African-Americans. Building l, on the other hand, was most likely the site of simultaneous industrial and domestic activities.

5. What Does It Mean?



The Tea Index increases during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with Mulberry Row sites discarding the most teaware. The lower value at Site 8 may reflect the site's distance from Jefferson and the mansion. Site formation processes may have also played a role in both Site 8 and ST116 low teaware values.

The overall teaware trend mirrors the consumption patterns of non-enslaved people that were regularly discarding outmoded ceramics and acquiring new forms and wares in order to keep up with quickly changing styles (Roth 1988).

Residents at House for Families, ST116, and Site 8 used and discarded utilitarian wares at greater rates than households along Mulberry Row. ST116 and Site 8 both have the lowest teaware values and the highest utilitarian values.

This reversal might be explained in terms of access. Residents at ST116 and Site 8 may have needed to store their own food more regularly than Mulberry Row residents.

Despite these exceptionally low index values, the slightly higher values seen at Mulberry Row sites perhaps indicates that slaves may have thought of chamberpots as both a utilitarian vessel form and one that signaled access to goods.

Owners did not consider chamberpots essential slave quarter furnishings. Slaves along Mulberry Row may have purchased chamberpots, or were perhaps given them due to their proximity to Monticello mansion.

6. Conclusions

During the last half of the eighteenth century, the desire for highly decorative ceramic wares in specialized forms, such as teawares, drove consumers to replace pewter vessels with more stylish refined ceramic wares (Martin 1989). It is clear from these data that enslaved households at these plantations engaged with the same consumer zeal sweeping the nation.

Certainly the acquisition of costly ceramics by both owners and slaves was a costly signal of a household's ability to participate in the burgeoning market economy of the late-eighteenth century. However, the motives that drove each group most likely differed. Wealthy planters may have demonstrated their political and economic power through the ceramic sets they frequently purchased.

Slaves, through the acquisition of select pieces, may have been signaling their access to their owners, their mobility outside of the plantation and their ability to earn small sums of cash. How slaves participated in the consumer revolution remains difficult to discern from Ceramic Index values. These methods are exciting as they clearly indicate different patterns of consumption between sites.



References:

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